Watching, Listening For Signs of Suicide Sept. 10 Marks World Suicide Prevention Day

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Washington DC, September 8, 2010—Of the more than 10,000 people in the U.S. now certified in Mental Health First Aid, instructor Marie Dudek feels a particular passion when discussing the training's suicide prevention component. In June 2003, Dudek's daughter died by suicide while still in her early 20s, an age group at high risk for suicide.

"Like most people, I never thought suicide would affect my family," says Dudek of Davenport, FL, a founding member of the Central Florida Chapter of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. "Even when we can see the signs of mental illness and suicide, we may want to avert our eyes. There's a real fear of doing or saying the wrong thing."

About 87 percent of people who complete suicide have a mental disorder. In the U.S. a death by suicide happens every 16 minutes.

"Mental Health First Aid teaches people that it's OK to talk about mental health issues," says Linda Rosenberg, president and CEO of the National Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare (National Council). The National Council, along with the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and the Missouri Department of Mental Health, manages, operates and disseminates the program. "Much of the course focuses on teaching people that mental illnesses are real, common and treatable."

By the year 2020, Mental Health First Aid is expected to be as well known as CPR and First Aid.

Dudek started teaching Mental Health First Aid last year, only one year after the course was introduced in the United States from Australia. Participants learn a five-step process to assess a situation, select and implement appropriate interventions and help a person developing signs and symptoms of mental illness or in crisis receive appropriate care. In addition to discussing suicide prevention, participants learn about the risk factors and warning signs of illnesses such as anxiety, depression, psychosis, and addiction.

Dudek leads a special webcast on Friday, Sept. 10, World Suicide Prevention Day. The webcast, presented by the National Council and based on the content of Mental Health First Aid USA, sheds light on the common signs, symptoms and risk factors for depression and other mood disorders that increase the risk of suicide.

The Mental Health First Aid program describes the warning signs of suicide:

- Threatening to hurt or kill oneself
- Looking for ways to kill oneself, seeking access to pills, weapons or other means
- Talking or writing about death, dying, or suicide
- Expressing hopelessness
- Feeling worthless, no reason for living, no sense of purpose in life
- Feeling rage or anger, seeking revenge
- Acting recklessly or engaging in risky activities, seemingly without thinking
- Feeling trapped, like there is no way out
- Increasing alcohol or drug use
- Withdrawing from family, friends, or society
- Experiencing anxiety or agitation, being unable to sleep or sleeping all the time
- Undergoing dramatic changes in mood

Dudek emphasizes that if people recognize these signs, it is important to directly ask about suicidal thoughts. She suggests asking questions such as "Are you having thoughts of suicide?" or "Are you thinking about killing yourself?"

"This is a time when people simply need to listen. People contemplating suicide are not looking for someone to tell them what to do," concludes Dudek. "They need someone who will listen with an open heart knowing another human being is in pain. For my daughter, she just wanted to end the pain."

Information about Mental Health First Aid may be found at www.MentalHealthFirstAid.org or by contacting Meena Dayak, MeenaD@thenationalcouncil.org, 202.684.3728.

Mental Health First Aid is the initial help given to a person showing symptoms of mental illness or in a mental health crisis until appropriate professional, peer, or family support can be engaged. A 12-hour course prepares members of the public to provide Mental Health First Aid to those in need. To learn more and find a training program in your community, visit www.MentalHealthFirstAid.org.